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Celebrating 80 Years on the Wild Coast – Morgan Bay Hotel, Better Than Ever

Set along one of the Wild Coast's most beautiful stretches of shoreline, Morgan Bay Hotel turns 80 this year - celebrating eight decades of sun-soaked school holidays, seaside romances, multi-generational family gatherings and the simple joy of time spent by the sea. From barefoot summer days on the beach to whale sightings in the warm winters, this much-loved Eastern Cape icon has quietly shaped holiday memories for generations of South Africans.

Still owned and operated by the founding family, the Morgan Bay Hotel has quietly evolved with the times while holding fast to what matters most: a deep sense of place, warm personal hospitality and the timeless appeal of a classic seaside holiday. From sun-soaked beach days and winter cliff-top walks with Nguni cows grazing nearby and sunset dinners overlooking the sea, Morgan Bay Hotel remains a rare constant on a coastline that feels as wild and restorative as ever.

"Morgan Bay Hotel has always been about personal connection, thoughtful comfort and a touch of old-world hospitality," says Richard Warren-Smith, the grandson of the original founder Ivan Warren-Smith and the third generation of the family to run the hotel. "Over the years, our guests have come to know us as a family - and we've come to know them, too, as familiar faces return year after year."

When Richard and his wife, Jackie, took over the hotel in 2006, they poured energy and investment into renovations and expansion. "Our guests have always loved the predictability of coming here - that sense of tradition and familiarity," says Jackie Warren-Smith. "But celebrating 80 years doesn't mean standing still. When Richard and I began modernising and bringing more of our own personality into the business, it really took off. Our goal has never been to freeze the hotel in time but to keep it feeling fresh, contemporary and relevant - while protecting the essence of what makes people return, year after year."

The 2010 openings of the wedding venue, Milkwood Spa, The Sandhoppa beach boutique and the brand-new Deck Restaurant and Bar added a fresh dimension to the Morgan Bay experience, offering something for every guest. The Deck quickly became an all-day dining destination, with a crowd-pleasing menu -from pizzas to sushi platters - attracting in-house guests, local food lovers and still to this day, day-trippers from as far afield as East London. Later, additional rooms were added alongside a new outdoor pool deck and a larger dining room to cater for guests checking into the hotel's 42 rooms and suites.

A story that started in 1946

The history of the Morgan Bay Hotel began in 1946, just after World War II, when Royal Air Force engineer Ivan Warren-Smith stepped off a bus in the small hamlet of Morgan Bay. Back then, the area was largely farmland offering summer grazing and a seaside escape for farmers from inland. Ivan had heard of a modest boarding house for sale, and he arrived with a suitcase in hand and a dream in his head. He bought the property and got to work. The rest, as they say, is history.

Ivan's son, Jeff came to help him with the business in 1962, married Sue in 1964 and they have three children, Richard, Andrew and Sarah-Jane. The hotel continued to grow from strength to strength under Jeff's and Sue's leadership.

Over 80 summers of school-holiday bustle - and 80 mild winters spent watching Southern Right whales migrate along the coastline - the Warren-Smith family has nurtured, polished and perfected their seaside haven. Set just an hour's drive from East London, in one of the Wild Coast's most picturesque corners, Morgan Bay Hotel remains a timeless escape, blending coastal charm and an authentic welcome with contemporary comforts.

While that golden thread of hospitality remained constant, the hotel continued to evolve. From its origins as a humble boarding house, Warren-Smith expanded the offering in the 1950s with guest cottages and a larger hotel footprint. In 1961, he added a caravan park, and today the grassy riverside sites, with sweeping sea views remain a much-loved extension of the hotel.

The village itself - officially renamed Gxarha in 2022 - began to flourish in the 1970s, when some of the farmland was sold off and developed for housing. In 1975 came a milestone that changed everyday life for residents and visitors alike: electricity. It added extra sparkle to evenings at the boisterous Fish Eagle Arms Bar, but the journey to Morgan Bay was still an adventure, with a rutted gravel road that kept the destination delightfully off the map.

That didn't stop loyal holidaymakers returning year after year for their annual dose of sun, sea and serenity. Then came another turning point: a tar road, and easier access that put Morgan Bay more firmly on the map. As word spread, and more travellers discovered this Wild Coast gem, the hotel grew to meet demand.

Today, Morgan Bay Hotel remains one of the Wild Coast's standout seaside destinations:

set on a long sweep of golden sand, framed by the dramatic krantzies to the west and anchored by a family-run ethos that keeps guests coming back.

And while the transformation from boarding house to modern seaside hotel is a story of vision, dedication and hard work, the hotel's enduring appeal comes down to one simple ingredient: family.

"It's about connection. That's the true DNA of Morgan Bay Hotel," says Richard. "We have guests who are now bringing the third generation of their family to stay with us. They know us, and we know them. There's a bond to this place and to the people who live and work here. It's a family hotel in more ways than one."

Toast 80 years of Wild Coast hospitality - book your stay and create your own Morgan Bay memories. Visit www.morganbayhotel.co.za for 80-year celebration specials or call +27 (0)43 841 1062 to reserve your seaside escape

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Issue on behalf of the Morgan Bay Hotel by Ten x Collective. For any queries or assistance please reach out to aphiwe@tenxcollective.co.za or lisa@tenxcollective.co.za

Notes to editors:

Did you know?

- Morgan Bay is named after A.F. Morgan, Master of the Royal Naval ship *Barracouta*, which surveyed the southeast African coast in 1822.
- Cape Morgan, with its automatic lighthouse, and the sheltered bay nearby also take their name from A.F. Morgan.
- The Nchara River, on whose right bank Morgan Bay lies, was named for the crabs found there. Its calm lagoon is a charming feature of this picturesque coastline.
- Ivan Warren-Smith was inspired to move to Morgan Bay after World War II, following a tip from his O/C in Italy about a boarding house for sale.
- Ivan modernized the property almost single-handedly using a Jeep and local unskilled labor, at a time when the town had no running water and electricity only arrived in 1975.

- Richard and Jackie joined the family business in the early 1990s, helping transform the hotel from a 1-star to a 3-star establishment at the time.
- In 2006, Jeff and Sue officially handed ownership to Richard and Jackie, along with their three children, Michael, Dylan, and Cate, who are being groomed for hospitality.
- The Warren-Smith family is committed to continuing the family legacy, ensuring Morgan Bay Hotel is passed down through generations.